

ARMORED RESCUE

by **LIEUTENANT COLONEL J. C. LAMBERT**

"At Hatten and Rittershoffen the 14th Armored Division fought one of the greatest defensive battles of the War."

... Jacob L. Devers, General, U.S.A., 6th Army Group

THE historian's perspective of a war visualizes a series of battles designed to annihilate a nation or group of nations. Each battle comprising a war is delicately weighed on the scales of strategical value and assigned relative space in the scheme of the master design. The perspective of a battle and the perspective of a war vary in direct proportion to the echelon of the observer and the power of description of the reporting agency. This axiom invariably extends to the observer who witnesses a small segment of the battle through the periscope of a tank or over the sights of a rifle. Always the battle within the limits of sight and hearing is the most decisive battle since Cannae.

By January 1945, the Ardennes counteroffensive had been contained by the Allied forces. Neither the Allied nor the Axis ledgers have been, nor is it likely that they will be, reconciled as to the political, economic, and strategical implications involved in this campaign. Nevertheless, as the forward impetus of the drive began to slacken, the enemy developed a pattern of well planned, well controlled maneuvers on the front of the 6th Army Group in Alsace. These maneuvers emanated principally from Fortress de Bitche in the Maginot Line; the Wissembourg Gap Sector of the Siegfried Line; the Rhine River line between Strasbourg and Haguenau, and the Colmar Pocket. The developments have been variously described as diversionary demonstrations, newspaper battles, and inconsequential patrol actions. From the perspective of the Supreme Commander this may have been true. In fact, in his report on the Allied Expeditionary Force, he states, "Between Sarreguemines and Neunhofen attacks shaping up into two prongs were made on 1 January in the direction of Rohrbach and toward the Saverne Pass, southeast of Bitche. Six days later the enemy succeeded in pushing troops across the Rhine a few miles north of Strasbourg, and gained ground in a thrust northward from the Colmar Pocket. This latter drive threatened to overrun the Alsatian Plain and isolate Strasbourg. General Devers' forces inflicted heavy losses upon the enemy and with vigorous countermeasures, in spite of difficulties under which they labored, succeeded in stabilizing the line so that no militarily essential ground in the Vosges was lost and Strasbourg itself no more than threatened."

For the manure-, town-ridden troops disposed in the Alsatian Plains and along the rocky reaches of the Vosges, the perspective was considerably more sinister. Unlike the still increasing multitude of high and low

level G-2's who now represent that they had complete advance intelligence on the German intentions in the Bulge, the peepsight and periscope intelligence guessers who were occupying the ground just had an itchy uneasiness that they were being surrounded. They foresaw in those German maneuvers not only a significant strategy designed to recoup the politically important Alsatian Plains and cities (the Germans had widely advertised to the natives that they would be back by the New Year) but a bold and studied plan to destroy Allied forces east of the Vosges, and to seize passes through the mountains and cut communication lines into Southern France. Obviously, the first step would be to seal the Saverne and Belfort Gaps, thus trapping the U.S. VI Corps and French First Army. The shallowness of troop disposition would then afford an easy opportunity to reestablish communications with the Colmar Pocket, and at the same time destroy communications to the South, thereby neutralizing the port of Marseille, then an important theater supply head. How, when, and under what conditions the major offensive to accomplish this would be undertaken could not be estimated (Figure 1).

A review of old notes reveals that the captured German periscope and peepsight experts, contrary to the then current opinion, accurately portrayed the strategy of the offensive as involving a closely coordinated air and ground action (and its failure was later attributed to the lack of one over-all commander). The detailed scheme of operations, according to them, provided that mountain-trained SS troops, reinforced with self-propelled artillery, would spearhead a two-pronged attack from Fortress de Bitche south along the crest of the Vosges mountains, seizing Rohrbach to the west of the mountains, and thereby threatening the left flank of the Seventh Army, and the city of Ingwiller to the east of the mountains. Armored and infantry columns, heavily reinforced with self-propelled artillery and air, were to attack northwest from Colmar and seize Selestat and the Selestat-St. Die mountain pass. As the Allied forces were engaging these attacks, a fast armored and infantry column, garrisoned in the Siegfried Line and reinforced by railroad artillery, self-propelled artillery, and jet planes (the introduction of jet planes surprised them, too), would attack southwest from Lauterbourg, fusing with the mountain forces at Ingwiller and extending south to seize the eastern exit to Saverne Pass. A second armored and infantry column was to cross the Rhine between Strasbourg and

Haguenau with the mission of cutting all roads south of the Saverne-Strasbourg Line and forcing the Saverne Gap.

That the knowledge of these prisoners concerning the major strategy was more specific than was the knowledge of most Americans below Corps level is emphasized by document files belonging to Hitler and Von Rundstedt which later came into Allied possession. Hitler, in a speech made to Army, Corps, and Division Commanders on 28 December 1944, stated among other things: "Gentlemen: I have asked you to come here before an action on the successful conclusion of which further blows in the west will depend. . . . Thus, the task allotted to the new offensive does not exceed the capabilities of the forces that are available. We are committing eight divisions on our side. With the exception of a single one, which is coming from Finland, the other seven are, of course, battle-worn; they have been partly refreshed. But the enemy, too, who at the best will face us with five divisions, possibly four, or possibly only with three, is not fresh, is battle-worn, too. One division is an exception; it is located directly at the Rhine. One will have to wait and see how it is going to stand up. There is also the 12th American Armored Division which is not sure yet to be committed. At any rate it is still a new unit which has not been in combat yet. But outside of that, the other units at the side of the enemy are battle-worn,

too. We are sure to get into a ratio here which we could not wish to be any better. . . .

"This second attack, then, has a very clear objective, namely the destruction of the enemy forces. There is not a matter of prestige involved here. The point is to gain space. It is a matter of destroying and exterminating the enemy forces wherever we find them. The question of liberating all of Alsace at this time is not involved either. That would be very nice; the impression on the German people would be immeasurable, the impression on the world decisive; terrific psychologically; the impression on the French people would be depressing. But that is not important. It is more important, as I said before, to destroy his manpower. . . .

"I approve fully of the measures that have been taken. I hope that we will succeed especially to push the right wing ahead fast, to open the roads to Saverne. Then push at once into the Rhine plains to liquidate the American Divisions. The goal must be the annihilation of these American Divisions. . . . I don't have to explain to you the second time just what depends on it. The success of the first operation, too, is very dependent on this. Because as soon as we finish these



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Colonel J. C. Lambert entered upon active duty at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1940. He served with the 1st Armored Corps at the Desert Training Center, and then with the 8th Armored Division. He next joined the 14th Armored Division, where he served as G-3, from July 1944 through to the inactivation of the division in 1945. There was also a three-month period as combat observer in Italy in 1943. Colonel Lambert is a graduate of the Command and General Staff College, and was integrated into the army in July of 1946.

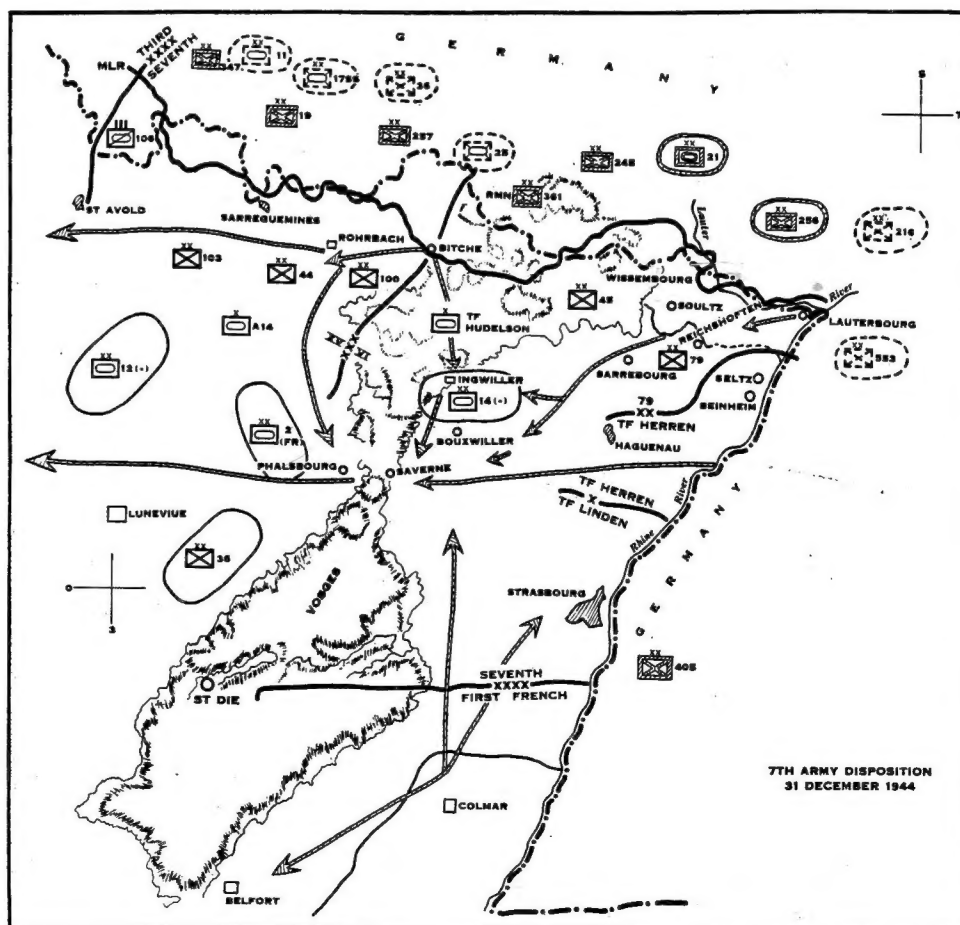


Figure 1.

two operations, A and B, and if they succeed, the threat to our left flank will vanish automatically. . . ."

Copies of the cover plan of the High Command West (Marshal Von Rundstedt) for the attack operation of Army Group "G" against lower Alsace and the participation of the Army Group Over Rhine referred to by Hitler were also seized. The salient features of this plan provided that the initial attack would be launched on 31 December 1944 with the initial objective of reaching a line ENCHENBERG-SARRENSBERG-WINGEN-WIMMENAU-ROTHBACH-ZINSWILLER-WASENBERG. Subsequent objectives were defined "to cut off the enemy strength in lower Alsace and destroy the enemy west of the Vosges." Eight divisions, a Werfer Brigade, an Artillery Corps and a heavy tank battalion (Royal Tiger) with two flame thrower companies were provided as the striking force. The 25th Panzer Grenadier Division, 7th Parachute Division, and 6th SS Mountain Division were to be held for exploitation. The mission of Army Group Over Rhine was defined as the simultaneous development of a bridgehead over the Rhine, north of Strasbourg, on a wide front. Twenty-four hours after the attack of Army Group "G" astride the Vosges, it was to initiate a series of limited objective attacks, finally establishing communication with the north flank of the Nineteenth Army.

According to early thinking in tank warfare, the ideal was to attack down ridges, by-pass resistance, and avoid unprotected defiles. That is still sound thinking but in reality the modern tank must be prepared to fight in any terrain against any obstacles and to undertake any kind of mission from outposting an infantry line to mountain warfare (150 tanks deep and one tank wide). But to narrate the actual versatility of tanks, although this particular type of utilization is rather expensive, will require a slight digression in summing up a series of facts and events.

By mid-December 1944, the 14th Armored Division had penetrated the Maginot Line, captured Wissembourg, and was engaged in close combat in the outer reaches of the Siegfried Line. Presumably because of the drain on supplies, units and personnel, for the Ardennes operation, replacements were few, and artillery ammunition was rationed. Forward movement was succeeded by a series of futile jousts with Siegfried forts. Eventually the division was ordered to organize its zone for defense and on 24 December 1944, was relieved in place by the 79th Infantry Division. Concurrently with the relief, the Reserve Command, consisting of three troops of armored cavalry, one battalion of armored infantry, one company of armored engineers, and one battalion of armored field artillery, was organized as a Corps task force and assigned a ten-mile defense sector along the crest and eastern slope of the Vosges Mountains; Combat Command A was alerted for attachment to the XV Corps some thirty-five miles distant as a counterattacking force. The remainder of

the division was assembled as an armored reserve for the northern Alsatian plains defense, with a secondary mission of patrolling for parachutists.

31 December 1944 was clear and cold. The thin lines of the Seventh Army stretched some 84 miles from the Rhine River through the Vosges Mountains to St. Avold (Figure 1). The VI Corps held the right (east) flank, the defense lines running an irregular course from a point south of Bitche, northeast through the mountains to Neuhoffen, thence northeast along the eastern slopes of the mountains to Lembach, thence along the Seltzbach River and Maginot Line to the Rhine River and south to Bischwiller. The composite task force from the 14th Armored Division occupied the ten-mile sector on the left (west) flank of the VI Corps. The remainder of the line was predominantly garrisoned by miscellaneous type units and by infantry units that had been assigned for the purpose of indoctrination and completion of training. The Sarreguemines-Haguenau main road traversed the area. Owing to the Germanized nature of the previous Alsatian government and the proximity of the civilian population to the front line, it was necessarily presumed that the enemy was well acquainted with the Allied effective strength, supplies, reserves, and detailed disposition.

For three days preceding New Year, Bitche could be observed from observation posts. During the hours of darkness, listening posts reported heavy rail and motor movements. Friendly patrols were unable to penetrate beyond the outpost line. Enemy patrols became larger and more aggressive. Intelligence estimates from higher headquarters finally fixed the enemy effective strength on the front of the task force as being about 600-700 effectives.

Mid-afternoon of 31 December brought orders prohibiting any type of New Year celebration. A light snow covered the plains and mountains. The intensity of the cold increased along mountain roads and trails. There was no unusual enemy activity. A few minutes before midnight it came—small camouflaged groups began to infiltrate without preparatory fires. As they were discovered they organized all around defenses and dug in. After a number of infiltrations along roads and trails had been made, a frontal attack was launched by white caparisoned hordes screaming, "Die you Yankee bastards." Machine gunners actually had to elevate their weapons to fire over the dead and wounded. The spearhead of the attack was identified as the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division which had been refitted and given special mountain training. It was reported to have had between 5,000-7,000 effectives and was reinforced by elements of the 21st Panzer Division and 6th SS Mountain Division. Enemy information further indicated that five additional divisions, the 256, 361, 559, Volks Grenadiers, and 19th and 36th Infantry Divisions were included in the attack plan.

The attack developed in a southeasterly direction, the impetus coming diagonally through the right flank of the XVth Corps and over the left flank of the VIth Corps (interrogation of prisoners indicated that they had no difficulty in determining the Corps boundaries because of the different type elements in the line and their known corps assignment). Simultaneously, a similar attack had been mounted in the vicinity of Fortress de Bitch and was directed southwest toward Rohrbach.

By daybreak the enemy had cut the main east-west roads and reinforced the ground troops with self-propelled artillery and tanks (they had improvised cleats on tank and track vehicles on account of ice covered roads). The 14th Armored Division task force command post had been isolated; the portion of the line held by armored reconnaissance elements had been completely overrun; the infantry battalion and attached engineers were engaged in close combat; the armored field artillery battalion was utilizing direct laying methods; the multiple antiaircraft weapons were being used for ground fire.

Although the task force was not under the control of the division, the commanding general dispatched a company of medium tanks without camouflage (no white paint or cloth was available) and a company of armored infantry to relieve the beleaguered troops. At the same time the Corps committed additional Infantry and Engineers. Casualties from enemy fire and weather mounted alarmingly. The remainder of the armored infantry battalion which then had one company engaged was committed during the afternoon. Reinforced by air missions, continued cold, and additional troops, the southerly advance was halted, with the exception of infiltrations in the vicinity of Wingen sur Moder by elements of the 6th SS Mountain Division. The portion of the 14th Armored Division not engaged was assigned the mission of guarding mountain passes to prevent infiltration into the plains; to patrol activities; and was held as a mobile counter-attacking force.

On 2 January 1945 the 14th Armored Division command post was at Bouxwiller. Combat Command A was attached to the XVth Corps, separated by some fifty miles of treacherous roads. Two armored infantry battalions were engaged in the Vosges mountains, some 20 miles apart. The armored artillery was reinforcing the fires of the 45th and 79th Infantry Divisions. The remnants of the armored cavalry reconnaissance squadron were patrolling rear areas. Combat Command B, consisting of one reinforced tank battalion, was guarding mountain passes over a fifteen-mile front from Ingwiller to Niederbronn. The ground was covered with snow and ice. On 3 January 1945 Combat Command A was relieved by the French 2d Armored Division and reverted to division control, but before they had closed in an assembly area they were attached to a task force of the 79th Infantry Division

and moved northeast to the vicinity of Soultz.

By 6 January 1945, the enemy had cut all east-west roads through the Vosges mountains north of Saverne Gap. Attempts to take exit towns or penetrate south of Wingen had been smothered and the situation fairly stabilized but heavy pressure was being continued. The Panzer and Panzer Grenadier Divisions in the enemy line were replaced by Volks Grenadiers. Considerable north-south rail and motor traffic was being observed east of the Rhine River and there were known supply and personnel build-ups in the Colmar Pocket but action in that sector up to that time had been limited to heavy patrols. It began to explode in the direction of Selestat, Mutzig, and Strasbourg. The First French Army was giving some ground. That left the troops in the Plains (the VI Corps and the First French Army) fighting on three sides with two mountain passes available for supply, evacuation and possible withdrawal.

From 6 January 1945 to 9 January 1945 enemy activity along the line from Wissembourg to Strasbourg increased. The 21st Panzer Division made a probing attack south from Wissembourg; limited objective attacks were made in the vicinity of Hatten and Gambsheim. Parts of Hatten and Rittershoffen were occupied. The 1st Battalion, 242d Infantry, then new and unseasoned, proved weak to the probing 25th Panzer Grenadier Division and was quickly overrun in a surprise tank-infantry attack launched from the Haguenau Forest. The 2d Battalion of the same regiment was committed to restore the MLR on 9 January 1945 but was unable to accomplish its mission. The 2d Battalion, 315th Infantry, was committed to relieve elements of the 242d Infantry but before the relief was effected, both units suffered severe casualties. By use of ferries and pontoon bridges the enemy continued to cross personnel and armor for assembly in the vicinity of Gambsheim. Areas initially cleared by friendly troops were quickly retaken as the enemy reinforced infiltrating troops with armor and self-propelled weapons. Heavy losses in personnel and equipment were suffered by friendly troops as the build-up continued.

During this entire period, Combat Command A, 14th Armored Division, was attached to a Task Force of the 79th Division. Its utilization was in strict accord with necessity as it was the only armor available and the only mobile reserve. Continued piecemeal fights were occurring up and down the entire front. The operational tank strength was parcelled out to the infantry elements by platoons. Not typical of all the actions but an illustration of the enemy tank strength is an incident that occurred on the afternoon of 9 January 1945. The 1st Platoon, Company A, 48th Tank Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Edgar A. Woodward and consisting of four operational medium tanks, was ordered into position as a counterattacking force. En route, in line, to occupy their position, sixteen

Mark IV tanks crossed the T. Within five minutes six of the enemy tanks had been destroyed and the others fled. During the same afternoon this platoon accounted for two more tanks, one self-propelled gun, one personnel carrier and one command car. Finally, on 11 January 1945, Combat Command A was committed as an entity. By this time the enemy had organized the high ground, fixed antitank guns in Hatten and infiltrated strong panzer and grenadier forces into Rittershoffen. The attack made little progress and suffered heavy tank losses. Elements of the 7th Parachute Division had been identified in Hatten, bringing to three the number of first line combat divisions involved in the assault. The troops in Hatten were surrounded and what had been the right flank was indefinite.

At about noon on 11 January 1945, the 14th Armored Division received an order to attack on 12 January 1945 to restore the Corps' main line of resistance in the vicinity of Hatten. The pattern and intent of the enemy strategy were obvious to the lower echelon strategists—they honestly believed they should be operating on army level. And to review—heavy pressure was being continued in the Vosges Mountains by at least four divisions; the drive from the Colmar Pocket was gaining momentum in the south; the Gumbshheim build-up had reached formidable size and was gradually inching out a wider bridgehead; three of the better German assault divisions had been identified in the zone where the division was ordered to attack. Their flank had been fused with the Gumbshheim bridgehead and their rear was supported by the Wissembourg garrison and the Siegfried Line. A pontoon bridge had been completed over the Rhine near Seltz and was in use by the enemy. The jet plane (ME-262) was introduced on 10 January 1945, a factor which compli-

cated daylight road movements and presented a real dilemma to the antiaircraft. But among the more serious propositions confronting the Commanding General, 14th Armored Division, were:

a. **Troop Effectiveness.** (1) Combat Command A was already in close contact with the enemy and would not revert to division control until assault elements crossed the line of departure. At the same time, the command was so closely intermingled with elements of the 79th Infantry Division that it could not be withdrawn without jeopardizing their safety and effectiveness.

(2) The Reserve Command, recovering from heavy casualties suffered in the Vosges Mountains, was en route to an assembly area for rest and refitting. Its infantry element would not be relieved in its position in the Vosges before 12 January 1945.

(3) Combat Command B, still guarding mountain passes and patrolling mountain roads, was disposed over some fifteen miles with the mountain roads iced over. It was the only command entity that could be assembled for an attack. The 62d Armored Infantry Battalion, the infantry element assigned Combat Command B, had been severely weakened by losses suffered in the initial phases of the Vosges attack.

(4) One battalion of armored artillery was retained by the VI Corps to reinforce the 45th Infantry Division Artillery.

(5) No infantry units were available to reinforce the division during or following the attack.

b. **Supply and Evacuation.** (1) Prescribed loads were aboard vehicles but artillery and mortar ammunition was rationed. Vehicular and tank replacements were available. The ammunition dump east of the Vosges was scheduled to be closed. No changes in ration and gasoline schedules.

(2) Replacements for all losses suffered in the initial attack of the Siegfried Line and in the brunt of the Vosges attack had not been received. Non battle casualties from frozen feet (particularly among tank and other vehicular crews) had been sizable. Replacements could not be expected prior to the attack and it was not known when they would be available subsequent to the attack.

(3) It would be necessary to reinforce existing casualty evacuation facilities to support the attack.

(4) Camouflage material for men and vehicles was available in limited quantities. Improvised cleats and extensions had been added to some track vehicles.

c. **Terrain, Logistics and Attack Plans.** (1) The high ground in the vicinity of Hohwiller dominated all avenues of approach to the north or west from Sultz and was the critical tactical terrain feature in the immediate area. It was held by reserve elements of Combat Command A, then attached to the 79th Infantry Division.

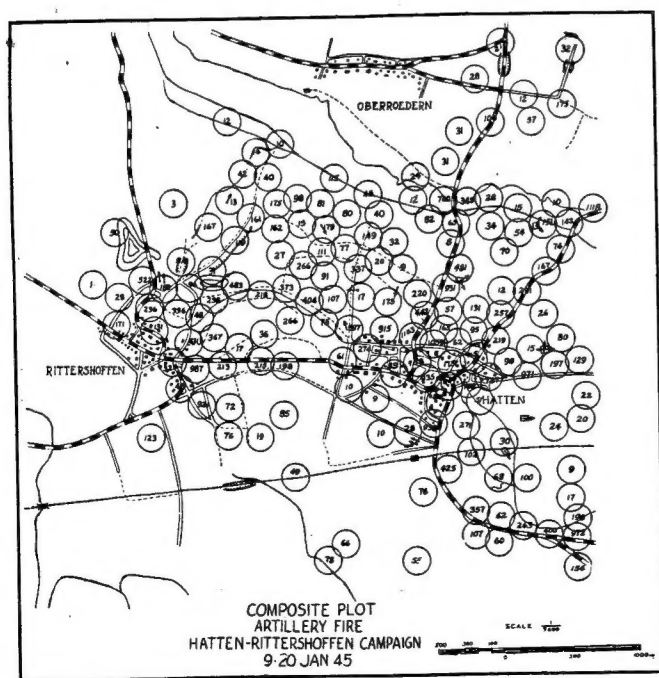


Figure 2.

(2) The Main Line of Resistance generally followed the Maginot Line from Birlenbach through Hunspach, Oberroddern, Hatten, Forstfeld, and southwest to the Rhine River. The sector between Hatten and Forstfeld ran through the Haguenau Forest in very flat, heavily wooded country. Observation was not possible in the forest area.

(3) Road nets converged in Soultz. The towns of Hatten and Rittershoffen lay on the south slope of a ridge between the north edge of the Haguenau Forest and the Seltzbach River. The Haguenau Forest proper extended north to the Seltzbach River and approximately 2,000 yards east of Hatten. The bare, open slope on the north of Hatten and south of Seltzbach River afforded no concealment from hostile observation in Stundwiller and Buhl. A stream flowed east of Rittershoffen through Hatten and east into the Haguenau Forest forming a valley defiladed from observation north and west of Rittershoffen. (The valley route was being used by the enemy for moving troops and supplies to and from Rittershoffen.)

(4) Maginot Line forts east, north, and northeast of Hatten were occupied by the enemy. These forts were designed to be invulnerable to artillery fire, containing reinforced concrete and earth protection for numerous galleries. Smaller forts south of Hatten were organized for machine-gun and antitank-gun emplacements.

(5) Three first-line enemy combat divisions had been identified in the zone of attack. The enemy had invested the north, east, and south sections of Rittershoffen and all but the extreme western tip of Hatten in which elements of the 79th Infantry Division and 42d Infantry Division were isolated. The actual condition of that portion of the line through the Haguenau Forest was not known; however, it was reported that enemy patrols were moving with considerable freedom.

(6) The objective of an armored attack would necessarily include initial isolation of both Rittershoffen and Hatten. This involved cutting the Hatten-Buhl and the Hatten-Seltz road. Avenues of attack were restricted to the ridge line (approximately 2000 yards frontage) between Rittershoffen and the Seltzbach River or to the low area (approximately 600 yards frontage) between Rittershoffen and the Haguenau Forest.

(7) The first avenue was under complete observation of the enemy from Buhl and the high ground north of Buhl but offered a reasonably concealed approach march and forward assembly area. The left flank would be partially protected by friendly outposts in Oberroddern. The right flank was exposed to enemy tank and antitank fire from the north and eastern portions of Rittershoffen. Marching distance of Combat Command B to the line of departure would be approximately sixteen miles for

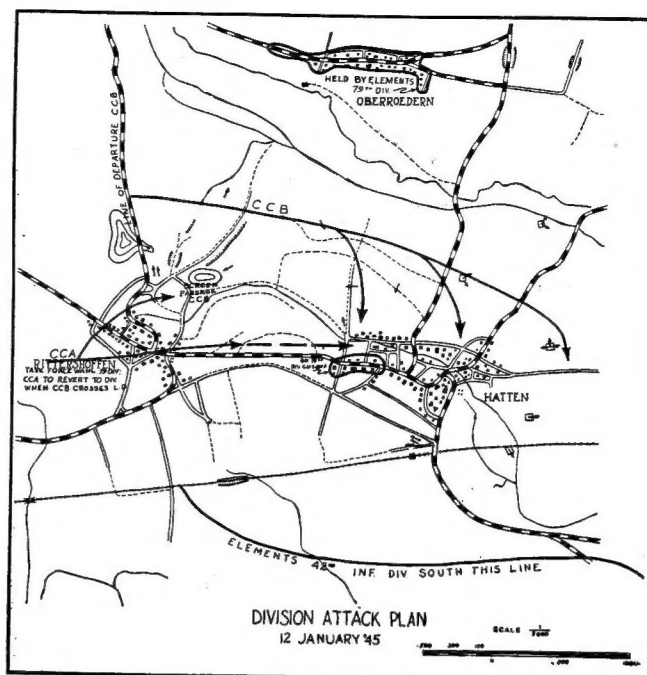


Figure 3.

the nearest element. Success would depend upon speed and surprise.

(8) The second avenue offered some concealment during initial phases of the attack but approximately two miles of the approach march would be in the face of the enemy. The left flank would be exposed to enemy tank and antitank fire from the south section of Rittershoffen and the Maginot forts in the flats between Hatten and Rittershoffen. There was no assurance of the security of the right flank until contact could be actually established with troops in the Haguenau Forest. Maneuver room would be restricted by a railroad embankment, drainage ditches, and the forest. Marching distance of Combat Command B to the line of departure would be approximately twenty-one miles for the nearest elements. Success would depend upon shock.

(9) Skies were overcast. A light snow covered the ground. Roads were iced over. Weather was subfreezing. Low fogs prevented effective air observation although the enemy's surveyed fields of fire were clear and unhampered.

(10) There were two road nets over which the division could move. The first and shortest was a ledge road along the base of the mountains. The other was much longer and was over the Main Supply Route which was then carrying its maximum load. Both roads converged in the vicinity of Soultz.

d. **Command and Fire Control.** (1) Command of elements of the 79th Infantry Division engaged in Rittershoffen and command of troops isolated in Hatten presented a question of mutual agreement between division commanders involved.

(2) The attack was to be launched through friendly troops then engaged in a defensive action, consequently, small-arms fire plans for outposts in

Oberroddern, the Haguenau Forest, and in the zone of attack would require close coordination.

(3) Artillery fire plans of the VI Corps, 79th Infantry Division, and the 14th Armored Division would require minute coordination. (Displacement of the 14th Armored Division Artillery involved a 15-mile march.) (Figure 2.)

Warning orders were issued. Combat Command B would attack at daylight 12 January 1945, the line of departure and axis to be announced after personal reconnaissance. Reserve Command would march to a forward assembly area, prepared to reinforce Combat Command B or to attack on order. Combat Command A would make a limited objective attack in Rittershoffen to screen the passage of the assault element and es-

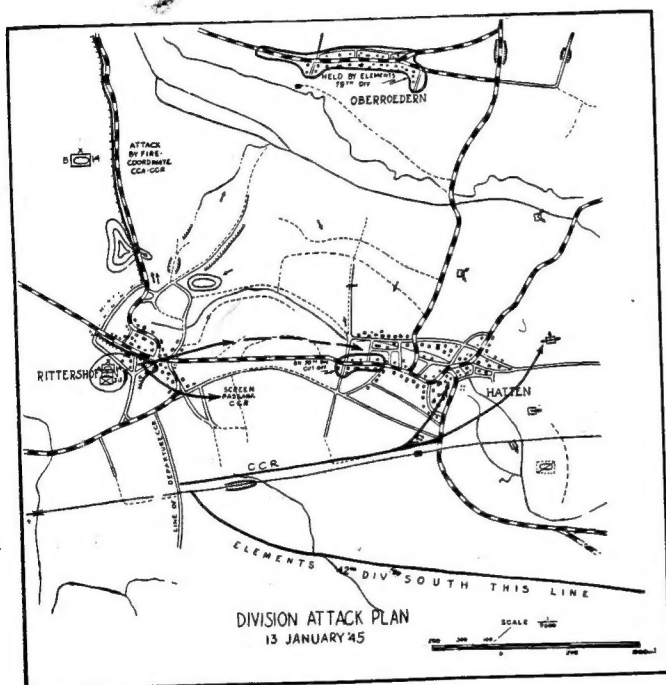


Figure 4.

establish contact with troops in the Haguenau Forest on the right flank. Division artillery commander would arrange all artillery fires in conjunction with the 79th Infantry Division and the VI Corps. The armored cavalry reconnaissance squadron would screen the left flank of the division between Soultz and Wissembourg (elements of 21st Panzer Division had been identified in Wissembourg). Supply and medical installations would displace to advance locations to support the attack.

A forward division command post was opened at Surbourg, approximately three miles from the line of contact, and personal reconnaissance made of the area. A conference was held with the Commanding General, 79th Division, whereby elements of that division in contact in the zone were attached to the 14th Armored Division for operations. It was there determined that the most likely avenue of attack was down the ridge between Rittershoffen and the Seltzbach River since the movement of tanks would be less impeded

by obstacles, and there would be more maneuver room and screening fires would be more effective. A line of departure was selected and Combat Command B notified (Figure 3).

As the Rhine fogs embraced the northern Alsatian plains, the 14th Armored Division commenced to displace forward. Recovery vehicles interspersed the columns to recover victims of the icy roads. The temperature was subfreezing. By daybreak the lead elements had begun to assemble behind the line of departure. Infantry half tracks and assault guns were digging in to support the assault. The artillery commenced firing preparatory fires and smoke on prearranged targets. The attack of Combat Command A in Rittershoffen opened with a fanfare of small-arms fire quickly reaching a crescendo as tank cannon, bazooka, assault guns and grenades joined. And then came Combat Command B, first the infantry element, dismounted and dispersed, moving low and at the double, followed by a wave of tanks in wedge formation. The olive drab was decidedly conspicuous in contrast to the snow. After an advance of approximately seven hundred yards, the infantry began to receive heavy automatic fire from camouflaged gun positions sited on the reverse slope of the ridge. As they were pinned down, the tanks drove through. Tank after tank was caught in the cross fire from the Maginot forts and from dug-in, camouflaged tanks and self-propelled guns. (The camouflage was, in fact, so well done that observers could only locate them through muzzle flash or the smoke blackened muzzle when the tubes were elevated or traversed.) The attack continued, cutting the Hatten-Buhl road and moving on to the east of Hatten, but was unable to encircle the town. A counterattack had already been mounted by the enemy in the northern edge of the Haguenau Forest to pinch out Rittershoffen but instead it was launched against the spearhead of Combat Command B. The pressure of the counterattack, supported by intense artillery, nebelwerfers and self-propelled guns, was so great that Combat Command B withdrew and organized the terrain between Rittershoffen and the Seltzbach River. Additional assaults were equally futile. Combat Command B had suffered sizable casualties in personnel and equipment.

By 1600 of the 12th of January it was obvious that Combat Command B would be unable to take and hold its objective. Combat Command A had not established satisfactory contact with troops on the right and had made negligible progress in the bitter house-to-house fighting in Rittershoffen. It was necessary to shoot medical supplies into the troops in Hatten by heavy artillery. The Reserve Command was closing in its forward assembly area with exception of the infantry which would not close until about 2000. The Reserve Commander was ordered to continue his march past the forward assembly area to the vicinity of Neiderbetschdorf, and to attack at daylight on 13

January along the avenue between Rittershoffen and the Haguenau Forest (Figure 4). The armored cavalry reconnaissance squadron, less one troop, was moved to the right flank to patrol the Haguenau Forest and maintain contact with friendly elements occupying that sector. Combat Command B was ordered to demonstrate on the left flank; to establish a base of fire, and to be alert for an armored attack from the direction of Wissembourg. Combat Command A would renew its attack to clear Rittershoffen.

It snowed that night. The infantry battalion had marched all the previous day and during the greater part of the night but at dawn the attack began. The enemy reaction was identical with the preceding day.

Two counterattacks were repelled in Hatten on the night of 13 January. One counterattack was repelled in Rittershoffen. At daylight on 14 January coordinated attacks were launched by CCA in Rittershoffen and the Reserve Command (reinforced by elements of the 79th Division that had been isolated) in Hatten. The attack of CCA was contained as the enemy converted the stone church and stone-walled cemetery in the center of the town into a strong point. The attack of CCR made rapid progress and by 1100 had cleared two-thirds of Hatten in house-to-house fighting and by mouseholing from house to house. Then came the counterattack. Preceded by intense artillery of all gauges and supported by heavy tanks and flame throw-

TABLE 1.—ARDENNES COUNTEROFFENSIVE

	DEAD	WOUNDED	MISSING	TOTAL
I. American Casualties 16 Dec 1944–25 Jan 1945 <i>30 US Divisions</i>	8,607	47,139	21,144	76,890 a
II. First and Third Armies, Ardennes, 16–31 Dec 1944 <i>30 US Divisions</i>	2,923	14,468	15,516	32,907 b
(Total Inf Div 19 c				
(Total Armd Div 10 c				
(Total Abn Div 3 c				
(Total Armd Gps 7 c				
(Total Cav Gps 6 c				
(Total TD Gps 5 c				
III. Seventh Army, Alsace, 1–31 Jan 1945 <i>11 US Divisions</i>	1,836	8,263	4,816	15,275 d
(Total Inf Div 8 e				
(Total Armd Div 2 f				
(Total Abn Div 1 g				
(Total Armd Gps				
(Total Cav Gps				
(Total TD Gps				

a From unofficial histories. Includes nonbattle casualties.

b From First and Third Army Histories.

c General Order 114, War Department, 1945.

d From Seventh Army History. Does not include nonbattle casualties, Air Force or French casualties.

e Does not include infantry elements of 42d, 63d, and 70th Infan-

try Divisions attached without supporting arms for indoctrination and completion of training. Does include combat elements earmarked for SHAEF Reserve.

f Includes combat elements earmarked for SHAEF Reserve.

g 101st Airborne Division which joined about 25 Jan 1945 for refitting.

with flank fires being received from the southern tip of Rittershoffen, the forward slope of the ridge between Seltzbach River, Haguenau Forest, and from the direction of Seltz. Thrice the infantry was forced back, reorganized, and advanced. The tanks carried the fight and although receiving antitank fire from three sides and taking heavy losses, managed to cut the Hatten–Seltz road. Similar to the preceding day, sheer superiority of fires forced them to withdraw. The next alternative was to reinforce and relieve the troops in the western end of Hatten. To do this, infantrymen mounted the decks of tanks for the thousand-yard dash. By dusk the remnants of the entire infantry battalion were in Hatten with sufficient tanks to support them. Casualties were evacuated and supplies brought in by tanks and half tracks convoyed by tanks, since wheeled ambulances and cargo vehicles were being fired upon indiscriminately. The enemy had reinforced his garrison in Rittershoffen and again the progress of Combat Command A was registered by the number of houses cleared, and not streets. The 47th Volks Grenadier Division was identified in Hatten making a total of four divisions. Enemy heavy artillery was being brought into action all along the line.

ers, the enemy converged on the Reserve Command from the direction of Buhl and from the direction of Seltz. One-half the gain was lost. The Reserve Command reorganized and launched another attack in the afternoon but after initial gains was counterattacked and forced to withdraw. During the night of 14 January 1945, there were three counterattacks by fresh enemy troops, all of which were repelled by heavy, close artillery support.

And so for the next five days there were attacks and counterattacks. What had been intended as a skirmish to restore the MLR had turned into a major defensive battle. The toll of friendly troops mounted and mounted. The houses in the towns, the churches, the public buildings, gradually began to disintegrate under the constant artillery, phosphorus, air, and flame throwing attacks. Blocks of buildings were destroyed to establish fields of fire. One hundred fifty-five self-propelled rifles were utilized to penetrate walls of strong points and phosphorus fired through the holes. The enemy continued to commit fresh troops while the strength of the friendly troops dwindled after each attack. The friendly garrison in Hatten was reinforced by a troop of armored cavalry and Rittershoffen was

reinforced by armored engineers. On 16 January 1945 an additional infantry battalion from the 79th Division, fresh from combat in the Vosges Mountains, was committed, supported by tanks, to take the northern section of Rittershoffen. One man of the assault company returned. Nine more tanks were lost. Sorties by jet planes were becoming more and more frequent. Friendly air missions were flown on the enemy-held section of Hatten, on Buhl, and Stundwiller. The aid station in Hatten with medical personnel and patients was destroyed by enemy mortars. Medical aid men

When you add to such a situation heavy snow, two infantry divisions plus attachments, one armored division plus attachments, corps engineers, corps artillery (including heavy artillery attachments), and three available roads, the problem becomes aggravated. It was a busy night. The Hatten garrison was evacuated by half tracks.

To report that the withdrawal was without some confusion and rancor would be a misstatement. There were some three to four thousand vehicles including field pieces, tanks, half track vehicles and wheeled ve-

TABLE 2

14th Armored Division Rittershoffen-Hatten 13-20 Jan. 1945	
Killed	104
Wounded	899
Missing	112
Vehicles destroyed in action:	
Tanks	39
Half tracks	51
Wheeled	30
Armored Cars	1
105 Howitzers	2
57MM	6
Ammunition expended by and in support of (rounds):	
Carbine	64,670
Cal. 30	682,787
Cal. 45	36,460
Cal. 50	43,337
37MM	1,825
57MM	1,800
75MM	6,723
76MM	3,392
60MM	3,977
81MM	2,584
Lt Artillery	33,747
Med Artillery	4,776
Hvy Artillery	730
Rockets	1,496
Grenades	3,542
AT Mines	7,500
Bombs	120
Gasoline Expended (gallons)	193,300

(a) Information from Historical Division, Department of the Army.

(b) Represents total ammunition issued to credit of unit and supporting units and includes ammunition destroyed and lost as the result of enemy action.

removed all conspicuous markings as they were being fired on indiscriminately. Evacuation and resupply continued to be effected by tank and half track. An attempt to supply Hatten by air drop was unsuccessful.

On 19 January 1945 the division was alerted to break contact and withdraw to previously prepared defenses behind the Moder River on 48 hours' notice. At 1300 on 20 January 1945, orders were received to break contact and withdraw during the night. One Combat Command was to fight the rear-guard action and cover the withdrawal of the 14th Armored and 79th Infantry Division and attachments. Roads were to be mined and cratered, and bridges blown during the withdrawal. Vehicles not recovered were to be destroyed. It commenced to snow again at 1500.

To discuss all the tactical factors involved in breaking contact with an aggressive enemy and withdrawing some twenty miles would require several hours.

This plus dismounted troops and refugees severely congested the available road net. The icy condition of roads, continued snowfall, and lack of time for preparations aggravated the situation (a battalion of 8-inch howitzers was digging in its trails in the vicinity of Hoelschloch at 1600 and received withdrawal orders at 1700). On the other hand it must be conceded that under the conditions the VI Corps did a magnificent job in controlling and coordinating. Owing to weather conditions and rear guard action it was two days before the enemy reacted.

The shorter line occupied by the Army freed additional troops for the Colmar Pocket and for the Gambenheim bridgehead. Pressure in the Vosges weakened; however, the enemy continued to make probing thrusts into the Moder River defenses until early February.

In the final analysis, when battle is joined the outcome is determined not by fire capabilities but by fire

delivery—the amount of controlled fire delivered at a critical place at a critical time. Viciousness of battle is measured by the riflemen killed and wounded and not by the numbers missing in action. At the height of the Ardennes offensive, Allied troops were faced with superiority in numbers and fire. It was a hard, bitterly contested battle. In Alsace there was an equally aggressive and determined enemy. In addition to having superiority in numbers and fire, he had the advantage of terrain and observation, short supply lines and a plentiful supply of ammunition. There, also, was a hard, bitterly contested battle.

Applying the comparative measuring rod of battle intensity to the two phases of the Bulge Counter Operations it is interesting to note that from the number of troops involved, the weather, and the terrain, the Alsatian phase equalled if not surpassed the Ardennes phase. Table 1.

As a part of the Alsatian phase of the Ardennes Operations, the 14th Armored Division, undermanned and outgunned, undertook to relieve the remnants of two beleaguered infantry battalions and restore a four-thousand-yard portion of the Corps MLR. Instead of

encountering localized elements of a demonstration force, it ran head on into a major counteroffensive. The cost report for an eight-day period of operations is a fair representation of one phase of the fighting. Considering that the division was being utilized against fortified positions and in restricted terrain, Table 2 illustrates the bitterness of the actions.

According to the myopic views of the historians, the action in Alsace may have been diversionary in nature. If that is true, the expenditure of men, ammunition and equipment to effect the demonstration and the expenditures required to halt it attest that it was the most colossal one ever mounted in the history of war. Certainly the breadth of the front, lack of communications, and conspicuous absence of poetical reportorial agents prevented the development of an epic or saga. Nevertheless, although their perspective may have been blurred by frost on the periscope and snow on the peepsight, the men in the tanks, the men on the ground and the men with the enemy all around them like to think that when they attacked against odds and held against odds, the intent of the enemy was more significant.

The Story of Soviet Armor

(Continued from page 30)

edgment of their debt to Americans in this sphere, and their feeling that since then both the U.S. and the USSR have left Europe in the lurch as regards production methods, should be an encouragement to Americans. It should especially encourage those who think that recent acquisitions of German talent will give Soviet industry a terrific shot in the arm.

During the 1928-1932 First Five-Year Plan period, schools and courses for tank commanders and drivers were organized. In 1930 the main military staff college created a special department of mechanization and motorization, which cooperated with Moscow's Automotive and Tractor Institute (NATI). Tactical studies were advanced through the creation of experimental tank and armored car units.

Meanwhile, Soviet engineers strove to get the bugs out of what later proved to be many sound tank ideas. But Russian engineering and technical staffs just didn't have the background of European know-how. It certainly had none of the experience passed on to America by the waves of emigration of skilled artisans and engineers from Central Europe. True, through the centuries Europeans had gone to Russia to work, but there had been no mass migrations.

It wasn't that the brains of Soviet engineers weren't fertile, and the technicians capable of skilled work. Their big problem was how to transfer concepts from paper to metal without incorporating bugs that would take ages of trial-and-error testing to remove. It would

seem that for such accomplishments, experience is the best teacher. Certainly Soviet industry—however long on ideas—was very short on that priceless item. It was especially short of it in the automotive and tractor fields.

Meanwhile Klementi Voroshilov was figuratively tapping his foot in the Kremlin. He might not have been fully aware of the value of experience, but anyway he was fully cognizant of the military sensitivity of the Soviet Union in its "T" (for tank) zone. Therefore, at the turn of the decade, Soviet tank engineers were told to stop trying to materialize their dreams. They were instructed to build what dream castles they could upon foreign chassis that would roll reliably. They were to pick modern motors and suspensions developed and proved by foreign engineers and machinists whose background and experience enabled them to take out prototype bugs without endless experimentation.

With that directive there begins a new era in the development of Soviet armor. It is the "Middle Ages" of the 1930's. For Soviet armor it was an era founded upon an industrial base created by the First Five-Year Plan, and producing (with important Soviet modifications and to Soviet tactical concepts) tried and true automotive engineering designs of England and America. It was a period when Soviet pride, suppressed in its mechanical expression because of urgent defense requirements, stung under the stigma of failure. As they nursed their injured feelings, Soviet engineers schemed for the day when they should try a comeback—one they could make hold.